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Totem Preservation in Southeast Alaska

Emblazoned on posters, tourist brochures, and now even web sites, totem poles have come to symbolize the land and the cultures of the Northwest coast. The totem region, roughly 1,000 miles long and 100 miles wide, includes both coastal British Columbia and Southeast Alaska. Here in the resource rich, temperate rain forest a complex material culture evolved marked by a unique artistic style,

The art of the Northwest coast is governed by subtle rules of line and form. Few objects, whether wood, bone, shell, or fabric are left unembellished with carved, woven, or painted design. Although the artistic style evolved independently over many hundreds of years, most scholars now agree that carving of monumental wood sculpture did not become common until after contact with Europeans. This contact provided two elements that would make large scale carving easier: ready availability of iron for tool blades and the beginnings of a cash economy with specialization of labor. Russian traders, the first Europeans to explore the coast, highly valued the pelt of the sea otter, found in abundance in coastal waters. Trade in these pelts provided an income source for many in the tribal aristocracy. The newfound wealth and status were displayed most prominently in potlatches, ceremonial gatherings where material goods were given away to the guests. These events were often marked by the erection of totem poles, commissioned and paid for by the host.

Participants in a preservation workshop cleaning pole surface in Wrangell's Kik.setti park in preparation for the application of fungicide. Photo courtesy Randy Rodgers, Sitka National Historic Park.

Totems are almost always carved from a single log, although appendages such as wings and beaks may be carved separately and attached by means of a mortise and tenon joint. Western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) was the wood of choice. This species grows to tremendous size, is relatively easily carved, and has natural resistance to the fungal deterioration that progresses quickly in the moist environment of the coast. The region where totems were traditionally carved is limited by the natural occurrence of cedar. In the southern reaches, where the cedars grow large, poles four to five feet across and 50 feet high were not uncommon. However, in the north where environmental conditions limit the size of the cedar tree, totem carving changes in scale and style.

The golden age of totem carving is short, generally considered to be between 1830 and 1880. By the 1880s disease had decimated the population of many of the native communities. This, together with governmental and church efforts, resulted in the destruction of many aspects of the traditional culture. At about the same time, expeditions, often organized by museums in the large cities of both Canada and the United States, began to assiduously collect material culture of the Northwest. While some were scrupulous in paying for the cultural property, others assumed that all goods in villages not permanently occupied were free for the taking.

Shortly after the turn of the century the territorial governor of Alaska, John Brady, sent out the sailing ship Rush to collect poles from Tlingit and Haida villages on the shores of Prince of Wales Island. Brady's intent was to send the totems to expositions in St. Louis and later Portland to draw interest to the Alaska exhibits. Most of these poles were eventually shipped back to Sitka, the territorial capital, where they were erected on the old Russian walk along a small peninsula just outside of town. Initially administered by the territorial government, this site was declared a national monument in 1910 and was incorporated into the national park system in 1916. The poles and the scenic trail along which they are erected now form one of the primary cultural resources of Sitka National Historical Park.

Pole Preservation

The condition of many of the poles was poor at the time they were collected, and this was a concern of the territorial government. Notes and early photographs in the park archives indicate that the poles were repaired before they were shipped south and again prior to erection in Sitka. Early preservation efforts consisted primarily of filling checks with plaster and wood shims, covering decayed areas with sheet metal and linseed oil coated canvas and re-painting. Though traditionally paint was used sparingly to highlight features or carved forms, in the early days of the park it was applied over all surfaces, often in non-original colors. The caretakers were aware of the deteriorating condition of the pole collection, however, their ability to improve the situation was limited by lack of money, manpower, and knowledge of the nature of wood decay.

The CCC Era

New efforts were directed to preserving the poles in a depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps program administered by the U.S.Forest Service. Experienced carvers were hired to teach unemployed young native men carving skills. Sitka was one of about half-dozen sites in Southeast Alaska where the CCC worked to preserve poles and by so doing preserve important cultural traditions as well.

The work included both repair of poles and replication of those that were considered beyond repair. The repair process typically entailed recarving of the outer weathered surface, extensive wood patching of decayed areas, filling of checks with plaster, fastening of sheet lead caps to end-grain surfaces, applying fungicides and repainting. Although some of the techniques and materials employed would not be acceptable by today's standards, without the efforts of the CCC program most of these poles would not now exist in any form. Today many of the original poles have been placed in protective museum environments. A few, carved from particularly resistant logs, can still be found standing in totem pole parks throughout Southeast Alaska.

The highly deteriorated poles were taken down and placed beside new cedar logs for replication. A few segments of the original poles were salvaged at that time, but most were left to decay. At some sites a few of these totems remain recognizable, lying on the forest floor covered with mosses and saplings. The replicated poles, which now possess historical value in their own right, form the core of the collection of poles still exhibited outdoors at Sitka as well as other totem parks.

Recent Preservation Efforts

Recognizing that the CCC era poles in their collection were deteriorating, the staff of Sitka National Historical Park asked the wooden artifact conservators in the Division of Conservation, Harpers Ferry Center, to undertake a condition survey. In conjunction with that survey, the park hosted a conference in the summer of 1991 that brought together subject matter specialists, conservators, carvers, cultural resource managers and members of the local community both native and non-native.

Initially one of the more contentious issues was the propriety of preserving poles at all. Traditionally, little value was placed on preserving poles and some members of the native community thought it best to allow old poles to simply deteriorate and return to the earth from which they came. After considerable discussion, a consensus emerged that it was indeed appropriate to preserve examples of earlier carvings to provide inspiration and information to contemporary carvers as well as the general public. The conference attendees felt that this effort should go hand-in-hand with efforts to preserve the skills and cultural traditions associated with totem carving, one of the activities of the park since the 1960s.

In consultation with the park staff, the research and planning for the preservation of the pole collection began. It was apparent that the most pressing need was to stabilize the poles on exterior exhibit and that treatment of the original poles and pole fragments in interior display and storage should be put off until a later phase. In early discussions it was emphasized that conservation treatment and continuing cyclic maintenance could extend the exhibitable life of the poles considerably, but they could not be preserved for the long term in an outdoor environment. We therefore recommended that plans be made for eventual placement of the poles in protective storage or display.

Seven poles were taken down and remounted on new yellow cedar support posts in the first phase of treatment. The rest were stable enough to undergo treatment while standing. Treatment generally included cleaning, consolidation of areas deteriorated by fungi and insects,

structural repairs, and the application of a nontoxic fungicide and insecticide followed by application of water repellent. In some instances where the splits in the poles were extensive, support systems were fabricated out of stainless steel or aluminum and attached to the rear. Generally, lost elements were not replaced. Where replacements were made, either for aesthetic or structural considerations, native craftsmen, familiar with the art form were asked to carve the elements. A number of factors led to the decision not to repaint the poles: the original paint colors and patterns were not known with certainty, an intact paint layer restricts the penetration of fungicide, and we felt that fresh paint tends to look awkward on weathered wood surfaces.

The preservation work at Sitka took place over a number of summer sessions. This enabled us to assess the effectiveness of the materials and techniques after a few years of exposure and adjust the treatment accordingly. Based on that assessment a cyclic maintenance plan for the outdoor poles was prepared. The park maintenance staff initially worked with us on the pole treatment to gain experience and in recent years has successfully taken over the cyclic maintenance tasks.

Spreading the Word

As word of the preservation work at Sitka spread, caretakers of other pole collections in southeast Alaska approached the park about sharing its expertise. Recognizing the broader responsibility of the NPS to the preservation of these unique artifacts, the park responded by serving as a local clearinghouse for preservation information and helping to underwrite travel to perform condition surveys for other totem collections.

After assessing the condition of the poles at a variety of totem parks we began to realize the magnitude of the preservation problems, the similarity of the problems from site to site, and how pressing the need for treatment is if the CCC era poles are not to be lost. Although some of the preservation tasks require the knowledge and skills of a conservator, it was evident that with proper training individuals who are steeped in the tradition and live in close proximity to the resource could accomplish many aspects of treatment at less cost. Further we felt the treatment of totem poles could potentially serve as a focal point for community activity and help galvanize interest in the preservation of cultural traditions.

With that in mind, the Division of Conservation, in partnership with the Wrangell Museum, and Sitka National Historical Park, applied for and received a grant from the NPS's Cultural Resource Training Initiative (CRTI) program to provide training in carved pole preservation to residents of Southeast Alaska. The goals of the workshop were to enable participants to understand the nature of the threats to pole preservation, evaluate the condition of poles in their own collection, identify the treatment options, and perform some of the basic treatments. The course was geared to individuals, particularly members of native organizations, who have direct responsibility for caretaking the monuments but little background in the philosophy or practice of preservation.

The response to the workshop, which took place in April 1998, was encouraging. It brought together carvers, curators, conservators, and tribal administrators for an intense week of information exchange through lecture and hands-on work. Perhaps most valuable, the participants came to realize that others shared their concerns and that although the preservation problems are substantial, they are solvable. By the end of the week a fledgling pole preservation organization was established with the mission of disseminating information and working to secure funding for carved pole preservation.

The participants were unanimous in asking that a follow up workshop take place that will focus on additional hands-on preservation techniques. Thanks again to funding from the CRTI the course is scheduled to take place in Wrangell in August of 1999. This project provides a good example of how the NPS can leverage its expertise and funding and thereby have a positive effect on cultural resource preservation beyond it's own boundaries. One of the course participants wrote:

> I have learned much and been inspired and encouraged to go home and care for our poles. I feel more confident about what I can do.

If that attitude can be sustained the outlook for the preservation of these significant artifacts will be much enhanced.

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